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ABSTRACT

In response to the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act and its amendments, most urban schools have created special programs for homeless students to help them succeed academically and to offer them access to social services and a safe and stress-free environment. Recruitment, enrollment, and service coordination policies are adapted to the needs of the children and the community. Ways to educate homeless students range from total segregation to complete mainstreaming. Educating homeless children in schools for them alone may be prohibitively expensive. Another way to serve homeless children as a group is to move classes to shelters to reach children who cannot come to school. Integrating homeless children into the school as quickly as possible is a more common approach, intended to avoid stigmatization and to nurture the psychosocial development of the students. Increasing overall well-being is the goal of most school policies for homeless students, whether they focus on instruction, curriculum, tutoring, or ancillary services. Respect and caring can do as much as discrete educational strategies. (Contains 6 references.) (SLD)

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SCHOOL PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES FOR HOMELESS STUDENTS

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SCHOOL PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES FOR HOMELESS STUDENTS

Most urban schools have created special programs for homeless students to help them succeed academically, and to offer them access to social services and a safe and stress-free environment. Some programs even provide parents with services, an opportunity to develop skills, and volunteer or part-time work.

The more comprehensive programs may require significant expenditures, such as the B. F. Day Elementary School in Seattle, which serves only homeless students (Quint, 1994). Others, however, are surprisingly inexpensive, although they may be labor intensive. Some programs can be supported by private contributions.

The Lives of Homeless Families

Residence in a shelter is not conducive to good parenting, nutrition, or hygiene; provides no sense of stability; and offers little privacy for homework or family interaction. Further, shelter life may expose children to violence—as victims, witnesses, or even participants.

Some feelings suffered by homeless children can take a great toll on their academic success; fatigue can destroy concentration, hopelessness can undermine initiative, and anger can cause bad behavior (First & Oakley, 1993). Many children need comprehensive support for recovery. Some exhibit little evidence of the turmoil in their lives, but can benefit from supports that help them achieve their full potential (Eddowes, 1992). "Parentified" children, who assume the role of family caregiver and function at a higher level than other homeless children, need to be relieved of burdens not appropriate for a child to carry (Tower, 1992).

School Policies and Programs

In response to the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act and Amendments, which mandated removal of barriers to homeless children's access to education and provided funding, schools revised their policies and developed a range of education and social service programs.

Policies and Procedures

Recruitment. Some schools leave brochures at local shelters to encourage children's attendance by providing parents with information about enrollment procedures and transportation. Some even send teams to shelters, consisting of staff and, perhaps, parents of homeless students (Johnson, 1992). Team members answer questions, help fill out forms, and generally support parents; they also can check on frequently absent students.

Enrollment. Some schools have relaxed policies for enrolling homeless children, such as residency requirements and proof of immunization (Macro Systems, Inc., 1991).

They may also arrange for required pre-enrollment health examinations (Johnson, 1992). By involving most of the staff, many schools have developed procedures to integrate new homeless students quickly. They expedite student and parent orientation, assessment and placement, acquisition of records, and transportation arrangements. In some places, state and local agency cooperation can further streamline enrollment; for example, the Texas Office of Assistance to Homeless Children maintains a database that enables school districts to get information on a child from a central source (Eddowes, 1992).

Service Coordination. Schools often coordinate the delivery of various social services among themselves, shelters, and other agencies, and host regular staff meetings. While preserving the confidentiality rights of families, schools can share information about students to maximize the value of each intervention. Since schools are in regular contact with parents, it can make sense for them to assume responsibility for providing information on community health and social services.

Since changing schools seriously compromises students' academic performance, schools must help transport homeless children in order to retain them despite frequent moves (Eddowes, 1992). Some schools seek additional funds for buses (Johnson, 1992).

School Organization

Ways to educate homeless students range from total segregation to complete mainstreaming. As noted above, B. F. Day in Seattle serves only homeless students in the belief that students benefit from constant attention to the requirements of their situation (Quint, 1994). While there is impressive evidence of this school's success, its costs may be prohibitive in most districts.

Another way to serve homeless students as a group is to move classes to shelters to reach children who cannot come to the school building (Johnson, 1992). At school, homeless students are sometimes kept together in a class within the school, or gathered in a "transition room" before classes begin, in order to better target services to them and to coordinate transportation. Despite efficiencies in service delivery, segregated programs must take great care not to stigmatize homeless children, or to limit their educational opportunities as more traditional tracking practices do. Moreover, segregating homeless students prevents other students from learning about homelessness and may promote prejudice (Tower, 1992).

It is more common for schools to attempt to integrate students as quickly as possible, using the procedures discussed above to facilitate mainstreaming (Eddowes, 1992).

School Environment

Schools try to nurture the psychosocial development of homeless students by providing opportunities otherwise missing from their lives: to experience stability, security, predictability, and belonging; to make friends and play; and to enjoy the undivided attention of a caring adult (Eddowes, 1992).

Education Services

Instructional Practices. Homeless students may be more tired and have more concerns than their peers, so engaging their attention can be difficult. Teachers should explain the usefulness of mastering a task. They should encourage students to ask questions because their families may not be able to prompt their inquisitiveness. Students may respond particularly to one-on-one instruction and cooperative learning (Quint, 1994).

Since children in difficult life circumstances and those who do not speak standard English may comprehend less than other students, teachers should teach decoding strategies rather than use rote learning drills. Teachers should guide students in discussing the meaning of what they read.

Curriculum. One way to lessen the stigma that homeless students feel, and to educate all students about social and economic conditions, is to discuss the reasons for poverty and homelessness. For example, students can research real estate trends to learn how low-income rental apartments were converted to higher priced cooperatives (Tower, 1992).

Tutoring. A tutoring program can be administered by volunteers, possibly homeless parents. Tutors can be solicited from local colleges, high schools, corporations, senior programs (Quint, 1994). Homeless students can themselves be tutors, thus increasing their self-esteem as they help each other. After-school tutoring in school provides students with more learning time in a safe place.

Staff Recruitment and Training

Since reaching out to all students is a school's obligation, schools need to train teachers, counselors, and other staff to work effectively with homeless families and service agencies. Administrators should establish an environment where it is assumed that homeless families will be treated equally and with dignity. When reviewing applicants, schools should consider experience with homeless students and ability to work as part of a case management team. They should also try to assemble a multicultural staff that reflects the composition of the student body (Quint, 1994).

Staff training should consist of these elements: (1) sensitization to the situation of homeless families by providing facts, indicating similarities between the staff and the families, and visiting shelters; (2) instruction in the use of customized education strategies; and (3) ways to work ef-

fectively in case management teams. Program leaders should be adept at building coalitions with the school and service agencies.

Ancillary Services

A school can provide a special place where homeless children can go for a chat with a counselor or other sympathetic person, or simply some quiet time between the chaos of a shelter and the start of the school day (Quint, 1994). It should also offer privacy so that children can seek help without fear of being overheard. If possible, the room should remain available in the evening so students have a safe place for homework or play. A school may also provide these resources (Quint, 1994; Eddowes, 1992):

- Nutritious meals, including dinner for students who participate in after-school activities.
- Storage space for personal belongings.
- Clothing, second-hand or new items solicited from apparel companies.
- Personal hygiene items and bathing facilities.
- Health services or clinic referrals.
- Information on public assistance and services.

Conclusion

School policies for homeless students are concerned primarily with increasing overall well-being. They also take account of each student's individual differences, and do not make assumptions about a child's potential based on living situation. The teaching methods that work best with them are those that are successful with all urban students. Offering students respect, caring, and understanding, along with more concrete supports not available at home, can do as much to enhance their ability to learn as can discrete educational strategies.

— Wendy Schwartz

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